

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and
restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

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The Demise of a Landmark

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In 1854, Juan Bandini returned to Old Town, having been expelled from Baja California for inciting political unrest. He again took up residence in his beloved 'mansion' on the plaza, but much had changed during his three-year departure.

Without a steady source of money and deeply in debt, Bandini opened a "*tienda barata*" (cheap goods store) in the front *sala*. The effort failed and by September he had leased part of the house to Joseph Reiner who opened a hardware and dry goods store. Subsequent leaseholders included Jacob Elias, who ran a general merchandise and grocery store, and Heyman Mannasse, who opened a clothing, hat and boot shop. The front porch was remodeled with a wood shingle shed roof and boardwalk floor to promote retail operations.

None of these ventures or attempts by Bandini to sell his

home proved successful. On August 19, 1859, he transferred ownership of the *casa* and other properties to his son-in-law Abel Stearns to whom he owed \$32,000. He died less than three months later on November 1, 1859.

Over the next decade, the old home, reflecting the family and the town's decline, fell into disrepair. On October 2, 1858, a windstorm destroyed the kitchen roof and damaged the tile roof of the main house. By 1860, it was unoccupied.

As executor of the estate, Stearns requested Ephraim Morse, a New Town merchant and friend, to oversee the property's maintenance. In December 1861, efforts began with the repair of the clay tile roof, but in January a fierce rainstorm struck, snapping the house's rafters, hurling roof tiles, and toppling corral and garden walls. "It was not only a flood of waters falling from the heavens, but such a South-easter I have never known," wrote an alarmed A.S. Ensworth, a boarder at the nearby Whaley House. "The whole of the wall around Bandini's large garden below

the pear garden is one mass of mud, the water being about two feet deep around it."

On May 27, 1862, an earthquake cracked the adobe walls in several rooms, including a large vertical crack in the dining room. The quake also collapsed the entire end wall parallel to Juan Street. The damage was not repaired.

Over the next several years, adobe walls melted away, and part of the building was converted into a stable and feed storage complex. While vacant, locals sometimes helped themselves to tiles and timbers.

Clearly frustrated by his inability to maintain or lease "the old house in San Diego," Stearns wrote Cave Coutts, another Bandini son-in-law, in 1864, explaining that "it would be well to nail up the doors and encharge some one there to look after it."

That would not happen for another five years until Albert Seeley, a stage driver from Texas, bought the ruin, and with his wife's inheritance repaired and converted it into a fashionable hotel and stage stop.

